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March 5, 2015

Dear Esteemed Members of the Appropriations Committee,

I am Bonnie Smith, Executive Director of ERASE and Vice President of the CT Prevention Network, the professional organization for Connecticut's 13 Regional Action Councils for substance abuse prevention and behavioral wellness. I will read portions of testimony in support of the Regional Action Councils provided by Joel Rosenberg, Director of Andover, Hebron Marlborough Youth and Family Services, a non-profit organization that also serves the Town of Columbia. This statement was read last week at CPN's Legislative Breakfast.

Joel states:

"The three RACs that I am most familiar with include (NECASA, Capitol Area Substance Abuse Council and ERASE).

Working with ERASE for the past 20 plus years, has had a monumental, positive financial and service related impact on our towns and our organization. I can think of no stronger regional partnership or more meaningful one than what we have shared with our RAC, ERASE. And in the past two years we have also had the pleasure of working with Tom Steen from the CASAC, through an outstanding suicide prevention and postvention program that he coordinates.

ERASE staff who are trained prevention professionals have played a key role in our ability to technically assess community needs in the drug prevention and mental health, which has ultimately helped AHM secure funding to deliver community based services that address a range of public health, social and mental health issues. Some examples that come to mind immediately include the research support that we have received from our RAC helping to assess students substance abuse and mental health indicators in our communities, including the perception of school safety and school climate. This work has supported community strategies to reduce underage drinking, expand anti bullying programs and suicide prevention programs.

Our organization was recently awarded one of the fewer than 200 nationwide Federal Drug Free Community Grants. We would not have even known where to start this process without the support and expertise that we have received from our RAC ERASE. Our communities in large part received this grant as a result of that expertise. As a result over the next what we hope will be ten years our local coalition will focus on combating underage drinking, reducing the levels of marijuana use among teens in our communities and dramatically reducing the incidences of young people having access to unauthorized prescription medications. It is through the shared resources of our RAC and our local prevention council we are building an infrastructure of services by engaging young people and adults working together on some of our communities most pressing social issues connected to drugs, alcohol and behavioral health.

Two years ago the impact of suicide on our communities brought us together with two incredible organizations (CASAC) and (Tom Steen), along with Marisa Giarnella Porco from the Jordan Mathew Porco Foundation. Together they and ERASE helped lead us to funding through the Garrett Lee Smith grant for the prevention of suicide. Since that time with the help of the RACs we have now trained in our communities several hundred students, first responders and other community care givers in the QPR-suicide gatekeeper training program providing warning signs of an individual who might be suicidal and action steps any lay person can take to support a person in distress. This program that has been widely received in our communities.

The following are undeniable facts, spoken by someone who has been in the trenches doing this work for a very long time.

- RACs have knowledge of local needs, resources and the culture of regions throughout CT and they are able to support local grassroots community based prevention efforts through their work with Local Prevention Councils. Having the expertise of these RACs at the tables of LPC meetings each month has a) assured that local, state and private investments in prevention programs are being spent wisely and b) helping assure that this work is aligned with answering that most important of all RBA questions - are we making a meaningful and lasting difference in the lives of those we serve through the services we provide.
- The work of these RACs also help organizations like ours at the local level ensure substance abuse prevention and behavioral wellness topics are on the agenda in the community and guide the local prevention councils toward what science supports as effective prevention methods, which ultimately can lead to funding sources to enhance local efforts
- The RACs also bring current substance abuse concerns, new legislation and resources to the community such as (when K2/bath salts were first in CT, or making communities aware of new legislation such as several years when the social host law was first introduced helping parents and teens understand the legal and ethical responsibilities we all share in our communities in trying to prevent underage drinking.
- RACS also provide training that meets local needs such as QPR, Connect and Mental Health First Aid, State Wide Tobacco Education and other topics as needed by the community
- And RACs support data collection through school surveys and regional reports that provide essential information needed for competitive grant applications and in many cases RACs assist with grant applications....

In closing, I will simply say that as one leader in this profession who has done this work for a long time, it is sometimes difficult to ignore the dark financial clouds that sit above every one of our organizations as we are seeing right now. We are all fighting for the same pool of limited private and government investment dollars. But it is worthy to note that the cloud moves far away when agencies such as RACs and Youth Service Bureaus choose to work together as partners, rather than as adversaries. While I am by no means speaking for every organization statewide, I can say without question the experiences that we have had at AHM Youth and Family Services working with at least three of the RACs in Connecticut would receive a grade of A+.

I have nothing but praise and respect for the work that has taken place through the coalition of Regional Action Councils across the State and thank each of them for this work. I am confident that my colleagues in other YSBs across Connecticut would share similar sentiments.”

Thank you for your time today. For questions regarding ERASE or the CT Prevention Network, please contact me at 860.568.4442 or [bonnie.smith@erasect.org](mailto:bonnie.smith@erasect.org)

Warm regards,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Bonnie Smith", with a stylized flourish at the end.

Bonnie Smith, MPH, CPH